

This paper is one of a series of individual essays written within the conceptual constraints provided by "Forms for a Future." The collection of essays will become the individual episodes of the podcast.

## '... Forums for A Future...'

Podcast (#2) The Conceptual Foundation

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In this opening podcast I will describe the conceptual foundation for the series. There are four pillars: (1) economic, (2) political, (3) social and (4) personal. Our future rests on these four inter-dependent pillars.

Like the four directions, they are the four quadrants that constrain our path from the present to the future. The route must be safe and secure. It must lead to hope and promise. The least we owe our children is to leave them with a future no less hopeful than we were given.

The first three pillars are well represented by recent best selling books: (1.) The World Is Flat by Thomas Friedman, (2.) Future: Tense by Gwynne Dyer, and (3.) Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed, by Jared Diamond). Each author, respectively, from an economic, political and social perspective outlines how the modern world has brought human-kind, collectively, to the point where people must make significant changes to core beliefs and values if they are to survive in a New Era.

**Forums for A Future** provides the basis for a structured discussion of what those significant changes of core beliefs and values are, if our children are to have a sustainable future on this planet within their lifetime. This is a personal perspective, and it is the fourth and final pillar.

Lets take each pillar, one at a time, starting first with Thomas Friedman's book The World Is Flat. This is the economic foundation for having a future.

### **The Economic Pillar**

The Economic Pillar is the easiest one to identify with. Economic issues are the obvious disruptions that are currently "in our face".

Globalization has changed the nature of work. For example, here in the US:

- We have seen our industrial base go overseas, primarily to China
- we had seen corporate retirement plans and benefits sacrificed to cost-cutting measures said to be necessary to preserve American jobs

Sometimes the change produced by globalization is invisible, but, sometimes, it is startlingly obvious. For example, when you make a telephone call to customer service and discover that you are speaking to someone in India, who has introduced himself or herself as Frank or Susan.

The invisible part is: How did these changes happen? The answer is, a shrinking world. A world in which every person on the face of the earth has a growing opportunity to compete for every job, no matter where the person lives, or where that job is now. Thomas Friedman called this "the flattening of the globe," and thus the title of his book, The World Is Flat.

Students in India learn English (and the languages of other countries) so that they can compete for jobs in the United States, and in those other countries. India's universities trained them in computer software, US tax law, or what ever specialty they need. High speed, inexpensive, digital communication technology made it possible, just like that, for US customer service to be out-sourced to India at one-quarter of the cost of doing it here.

I first became aware of this trend over 10 years ago when the company my neighbor worked for laid-off his staff of computer programers -- real people who he had known and worked with for years -- and replaced them all with programers living in India. Since that day, he started supervising workers in another country who he had never met, and would never meet, all with English work names. Much to his surprise the change worked out fine. The Indians were excellent workers, seldom missed a day of work, and were receptive to feedback, sometimes by telephone, but most often by real-time e-mail.

That is when I first started to re-examine everything I then believed about our economic, political, and social institutions. It has been a remarkable journey, with this podcast series being but one stop along the way.

My neighbor's next surprise came a few years later when his company abruptly laid him off. The out-sourcing had worked so well for his small department, that the next step was to out-source an even larger segment of the US company, which included him.

That was when I fully grasp the realization that a remarkable fundamental economic change was taking place. The change was moving at a speed faster than what any individual could keep up with. The workers in India had started their preparation and training, for the transition that my neighbor faced, more than a decade before it actually happened. But, in two short years, first his staff and then he, himself, was out of work. Those two years were far too short of time span for any of them to have done anything to prepare themselves for the unemployment that they then faced. None of them even saw the change coming, even my friend, who two years before saw his staff get fired.

The lesson is clear: What ever you now believe about the economic capacity and future for yourself, or for the United States, that is based on what has been true in the past, is suspect and potentially dangerous to your future economic well-being. No current belief, no current value, no current practice can be left unexamined without risk. Preparation for the future rests on the willingness to re-construct the entire conceptual foundation for your life. What is true for the economic pillar, also applies to the political, social and personal pillars as we shall soon explore.

But, I digress. Let us return to the economic pillar, to the economic concepts that are required to understand the present and to think prescriptively for the future. The scope of the flat world, of course, is much broader than out-sourcing of computer programming and customer service to India.

As an example of how companies no longer have international boundaries, considered the emergence of China as a source of a growing proportion of our manufactured goods. This includes high-tech items, not just molded plastics. Thomas Friedman (page 210) recounts how on December 7, 2004, IBM announced it was selling its personal computer division to a Chinese company. The new, world-wide PC company would be the third largest in the world with \$12 billion in annual revenue. Friedman writes "...this new Chinese-owned computer company headquartered in New York with factories in Raleigh and Beijing will have a Chinese chairman, and American Chief Executive Officer, and American Chief of Operations, and a Chinese Chief Financial Officer, and will be listed on the Hong Kong Stock exchange." As a result 10,000 people moved from IBM to the Chinese company as their employer.

What is the logic behind this kind of arrangement? The simple economic answer is the basic article of faith that underlies the new economy of a flat world: It is the belief (and I said belief not fact) that capital drives innovation, innovation drives growth, growth drives higher individual standards of living, and higher individual standards of living produces the capital necessary to complete the circle. A circle in which everyone is suppose to benefit. Thus, the proposition that both workers and corporations should support free-market capitalism in the new flat world. The corollary is: Government regulation creates friction. Friction interferes with innovation and produces inefficiency. Inefficiency and lack of innovation inhibit growth. Lack of growth lowers individual standards of living. Thus, the argument is made that both workers and corporations should oppose socialism in favor of free-market capitalism.

We shall return many times throughout the podcasts to additional examples from Thomas Friedman's book, along with the writings of others. However, the value of Friedman's book is that it summarizes everything you need to know to understand the economic pillar -- The World Is Flat. There is no corner in which to hide. There is no withdrawal into isolationism. There is now one world market, and one economic system, for all of the nations of the world.

## **The Political Pillar**

The new economic reality, that there is one world market and one economic system, explains why the "political" is the second essential pillar. Simply put, in a flat world, all of the nations of the world have a growing vested interest in what goes on in every other nation.

The book, Future: Tense has the subtitle "The Coming World Order". It was written by Gwynne Dyer, a Canadian journalist, broadcaster, and lecture on international affairs. His best selling book examines how, following the end of the Cold War, there was an orderly, all it be slow, process, through the United Nations, of creating the capacity for all nations to live together, peacefully, in the emerging flat world. Dyer called this the "Global Project" of the United Nations, a project which, in the past, the United States has played an important role.

In addition to this "Global Project" of the United Nations -- to abolish war and replace the rule of force with the rule of law -- Dyer identifies two other "global projects." Because of 9-11 we are all familiar with the second one, the Islamist Jihad against the West. The belief with in Al Qaeda was that American retaliation for 9-11 would raise the profile of the radical Islamist cause in the Muslim world, and that Moslems elsewhere, infuriated with the retaliation, would turn to the radical Islamist movement and overthrow their pro-American regimes. Instead, there was wide-

spread support for attacking Osama bin Laden. The sole radical Islamist régime in the entire world was overthrown, and there was not a single Islamist uprising elsewhere.

Dyer notes that "...no doubt to bin Laden's great surprise and delight the United States walked deeper into his trap when President Bush proceeded to invade Iraq. But even still, the Islamist do not command the loyalty of enough people in any Arab country to pull off a successful revolution, and their Project remains stuck in the mud. Although, enough dead Iraqis and Palestinians may finally fuel the Islamic Jihad movement; but, for now, the radical Islamist dream of the world-wide Jihad against the West is a fantasy."

The third "Global Project" described by Dyer is the neo-conservative foreign policy put into practice by President Bush. Once the cold war was over, there was no single country that could challenge the military power of the United States. Therefore, the only future threat was from small and vulnerable "rogue states" that could be quickly taken out. That is when pre-emptive wars became a possible strategy. On this basis, Bush, and the neo-conservatives, have created what Dyer calls the "Pax-American Project" for the perpetuation of U.S. global domination based on the unilateral exercise of overwhelming American military power. The National Security Strategy of the United States declares that: "The United States will not hesitate to strike preemptively against its enemies, and will never again allow its military supremacy to be challenged" (Dyer, p. 10).

In the long run this foreign policy is not acceptable to the rest of the world and will be actively resisted by coalitions of other countries with vested interests of their own. Nor, is it acceptable to many American who feel it is their patriotic duty to help convince the US to abandon its notion of "Empire," and to return to a more cooperative role that actually reflects the new reality of world interdependence.

The terrorist attacks of 9-11 provoked worldwide sympathy and provided even greater urgency for new levels of international political cooperation. Instead, this opportunity was misused by radical extremists in the United States to provided an excuse for invading Iraq and embarking on its unilateral Pax American policy. The implementation of this policy has undermined the United Nations, alienated our traditional allies, widen the gap with Muslim nations, devastated the US economy, and diminished the moral influence of the United States.

That policy, Dyer argues, has put at risk "...the Global Project to abolish war and replace the rule of force in the world with the rule of law, the project whose centerpiece is the United Nations." This global project, and the authority of the United Nations, has been abruptly disrupted, not by 9-11, but rather by the reaction to it by the United States. What is most disturbing, Dyer maintains, is not that the United States will be defeated in Iraq but that it might not be defeated soon enough.

We shall return many times throughout the podcasts to additional examples from Gwynne Dyer's book, along with the writings of others. However, the value of Dyer's book is that it summarizes everything you need to know to understand the Political Pillar – the future of the world is very tense, thus the title Future: Tense. The United States cannot run the world as a lone superpower without provoking the rise of competing coalitions and the reemergence of Cold War politics. It is important to remember that the United States has only 4% of the world's population, a declining share of the world's economy, and the world's largest budget and trade deficits with

much of the tab held by China and the oil producing Arab nations, each with their own internal political agendas. Dyer notes that the neo-conservative Project, no less than the radical Islamic Jihad, is the work of fringe groups of extremists -- in both the Middle East and the United States -- who have delivered the world to the brink of disaster. His conclusion is that "...the world needs the United States back as the leading architect of global order, not as a hyperactive vigilante, and the world needs it back now" (p, 10).

## **The Social Pillar**

Jared Diamond is the author of the New York Times best seller Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed. He is also author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book Guns, Germs and Steel. In both books he combines geography, history and evolutionary biology to capture the dynamic forces that account for the rise and fall of civilizations from pre-historic times to the present. More than any other scholar, he has written in simple and direct prose about the complex history and experience of humankind on this planet.

In his newest book, Collapse, he asks two questions: (1) First, Why have some civilizations managed to survive for thousands of years, even under some of the most marginal conditions, and others collapsed in a far shorter time span, even under much more favorable conditions for human existence? (2) And second, what are the implications for our current situation as we move toward an increasing flat and technologically advanced modern world?

Of course, there is no definitive answer to these two questions. And, a comparison of the present with the past can always be dismissed with: "That was then and this is now; everything is different. Now we have the science and technology to solve any problem." Well, maybe so, and maybe not. As a sobering thought consider that, in the grand sweep of time, the story of the European settlement in the New World is still out: The less than 600 years since Columbus arrived is a far shorter period of time than the gradual rise, and then sudden collapse of other complex civilizations. Yet, the some of the similarities are remarkable familiar, such as exhausting a resource (trees or energy) necessary to maintain a growing population, until the resource was gone. The result, then, being rapid decline, and the social disintegration of what was a complex cooperative society, as people killed each other to be among the few who survive.

One of the many stories that Diamond tells is the history of Easter Island. Easter Island is a 66 square mile island in a remote area of the Pacific, roughly a 1,000 miles from both Chili and the larger Polynesian Islands from which the first settlers came in about 800AD. At that time it was a lush island, green with trees, with plentiful seafood, and good soil for agriculture. Today, it is a virtually deserted island, without trees, but with the visible remains of what was once a remarkable and complex society. There are over 300 huge stone statues, some 30 feet tall with 10 ton pieces of carved rock placed on the top. All were constructed without cranes and with only simple hand tools.

Visitors are struck in awe about how this could be; where are the people? The people have been long gone since about 1700 AD when the society collapsed. It has taken years of archaeological study to put together the story of what happened. Every tree had been cut down, the soil had washed away, all of the nesting birds on the island extinguished from over-harvesting, the inshore fishing depleted, and no wood left for building ocean going boats to do off-shore fishing.

What was once an island with distinct Clans and chiefs, that traded goods (fish, crops, lumber, etc.) from one part of the island to the other, had fallen into total collapse.

Simply put, the number of people on Easter Island grew in response to the abundance. But, as their numbers grew at an accelerating rate, the abundance declined at an accelerating rate. Each tree that was cut down contributed to the soil erosion that reduce the crops, that in turn led to over-fishing and over-harvesting of the nesting birds, thus deepening the problem. The ever grander and larger statues that were constructed, by competing chiefs, diverted more and more manpower away from productive work, while the construction and transportation of the statues consumed the trees at a far greater rate than they were replaced by re-growth. Diamond could not resist drawing a parallel between the chiefs, and their statues, with the Hollywood Mongols, living near his home in Los Angeles, who display their wealth in a similar way by building larger and more ostentatious houses than each other. Both reflect the gradual evolution of a complex class-bound society with larger and larger disparities of wealth and power between the upper and lower classes.

Diamond ends his account of Easter Island with the following: “The Easter Islander’s isolation probably also explains why I have found that their collapse, more than the collapse of any other pre--industrial society, haunts my readers and students. The parallels between Easter Island and the whole modern world are chillingly obvious. Thanks to globalization, international trade, jet planes, and the Internet, all countries on earth today share resources and affect each other, just as did Easter's dozen clans. Polynesian Easter Island was as isolated in the Pacific Ocean as the earth is today in space. When the Easter Islanders got into difficulties, there was nowhere to which they could flee, nor to which they could turn for help; nor shall we modern earthlings have recourse elsewhere if our troubles increase. Those are the reasons why people see the collapse of Easter Island Society as a metaphor, a worst-case scenario, for what may lie ahead of us in our own future” (p119).

We shall return many times throughout the podcasts to additional examples, and in particular modern examples, from Jared Diamond’s book, along with the writings of others. However, the value of Diamond's book is that it summarizes everything you need to know to understand the social pillar – How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed. The key word is “choose.” The future is not pre-determined; it will be determined by the choices we, the adults of today, make. For the youth of today, it is your future, and the making of it is now. Thus, I have entitled this podcast series: **Forums for A Future** -- the necessary discussions about the economic, political and social realities of today, in order to have a personal tomorrow.

### **The Personal Pillar**

It is, after all, individual people who live in the world. As structural concepts, the economic political and social are impersonal: they do not eat, sleep, fight or raise families. People do, all over the world, and they have thoughts and feelings about the economic, political, and social events with which they must cope.

As an example, consider the point and counter-point of the social and economic pillars. The basic concept of the social pillar, just illustrated by Easter Island, is that unregulated growth can lead to the spectacular rise of a civilization through innovation and through surplus productivity sufficient to produce a complex social structure in which the labor of some people are freed to

assume other roles, such as statue builders, Hollywood Mongols, and yes, soldiers. But, the division of labor and the resulting class structure can also be the seeds for an inevitable collapse once the tipping point of sustainability is crossed. Specifically, how many statutes, Mongols, or warriors, can the labor of the others support? In contrast, the basic concept of the economic pillar is that capitalism drives innovation; innovation drives growth; growth drives higher individual levels of standards of living; and, everyone benefits in both the present and indefinitely into the future. Both cannot be true. Yet, it is individual people who will make the decisions on which civilizations fail or succeed, and who will experience the consequences of how these forces play themselves out through political processes.

Thus, the fourth pillar is the psychology of the individual, because it is people who are the players and the ultimate source of responsibility. In the end, every decision and every human experience will reside within someone with a name, an address, and role. We are those people: You, I, and everyone else. Each of us are caught in the economic, political, and social Web. Some of us will lose our jobs, while others will become very rich. Some will support spending more money for social service programs, while others will suggest tax cuts will have a more beneficial effect. Some of us will die in Iraq, while others will protest against the war. Some of us, alive today, will choose to become suicide bombers while others will volunteer for the US armed forces will also die. Some of us will make decisions we feel are providing leadership, while others will feel powerless and shapeless in the hands of fate.

The "personal" and "psychological" are my areas of my expertise. This pillar -- the personal -- is what I will bring to the podcast as my scholarly contribution. My professional work has been on the psychological aspects of social issues: specifically, how economic, political, and social structures create the social issues and the social conditions with which people must cope. In short, it is about the psychology of change. Both the adaptations people must make in response to external events, and the role they can play in shaping and determining their own future. The first is internal and inward, and is based on the thoughts and feelings through which we understand ourselves. The second is external and outward and is based on the behaviors and expectations through which we express and know ourselves.

The personal pillar is our individual place in the sun. We are both responsible for, and the recipients of, our future. This must, necessarily, be cross-generational, because every present is someone else's past or future, as will also be true for each of us.

## **The Closing**

That ends the podcast for today. The economic, political, social, and personal are the four pillars on which the podcast series is built. This ends Part I of the series. The next Podcast will begin Part II, which is entitled "A Philosophy For The 21st Century." Part II will provide the perspective for how to get from the present to a future we will be proud to give to our children and to our children's children.